

Vernacular Architecture as Self-Determination: Venturi, Scott Brown and the Controversy over Philadelphia's Crosstown Expressway, 1967-1973

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The work of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown is widely known for its influence on postmodern architecture. Their aesthetic, embracing symbolism and assemblage of various styles, is well publicised and has inspired architecture throughout the world. In contrast, the political context of their work and its political significance have been neglected, even though they promise valuable insights into the architectural culture of the late 1960s and early 1970s and the political dimension of architecture more generally. Examining Venturi and Scott Brown's little-known work on Philadelphia's South Street, an urban commercial area threatened by plans for an expressway, shows us how power structures were interwoven with arguments on aesthetic principles during this period, and can lead to a better understanding of the interaction between architectural theory and political history.

The South Street project, a community-sponsored alternative design to City plans, was carried out during the same period as the research for *Learning from Las Vegas* (LLV) and echoes many of its themes. Grounded in the politics of redevelopment and expressway construction in their hometown of Philadelphia, it shows Venturi and Scott Brown not only as architects but as political actors. Perhaps even more than LLV, it reveals how aesthetic standards were intertwined with the question 'who is to decide what to build?'. On the one hand vernacular taste could only flourish if individual owners and users were allowed to arrange the built environment as they pleased. On the other hand appreciating

the vernacular aesthetic implied acknowledging the right of self-determination of residents and users in planning issues - thus legitimising the struggle against the inner-city expressway.

This contribution will assess the role of architects in society from the vantage point of political history. The first part of this article sheds light on discourses among urbanists, professional planners and architects, hence stressing architectural theory both as a guideline along which architects act and a reflection of architects' self-conception. It will embed Venturi and Scott Brown's influential book on the aesthetics of Las Vegas in the context of the debates of the 1960s. The second part will pursue a reverse approach, reconstructing the political history of the confrontation over the Philadelphia expressway. This part primarily draws on sources of local political significance, and tries to place Venturi and Scott Brown as actors in this specific context. Put together, both perspectives will shed light on how architects act within their professional community as well as in local political environments. In addition, the example indicates how the architects, acting in both spheres, shaped their theses and practices by reciprocal cross-referencing between these two spheres. They needed and managed to establish a coherent image of their theoretical assumptions and concrete action on the site of political controversy.

Learning From Las Vegas: the political message

Learning from Las Vegas, published in 1972,

contains one explicit political statement: 'Analysis of existing American urbanism is a socially desirable activity to the extent that it teaches us architects to be more understanding and less authoritarian in the plans we make for both inner-city renewal and new development.'¹ Even though Scott Brown, Venturi and their co-author Steven Izenour go on to analyse the aesthetics of vernacular architecture, the very legitimisation for doing so is captured in this short declaration.

The claim for a 'less authoritarian' approach to architecture reflected the condemnation of what had come to be considered the negative side of modernism. The criticism was not only aimed at the bold aesthetic language in the tradition of the Bauhaus, but just as much at underlying political presumptions of Le Corbusier. The master of modernist architecture and urban planning had proposed to view the home as a 'machine for living'. For Le Corbusier, the standardisation of design would bring forth the desired standardisation of lifestyles. The modernist paradigm entailed an implicit form of coercion, so the argument of critics ran, forcing dwellers to reshape their lives according to planners' intentions.² What Venturi and Scott Brown criticised, in short, was the complete disregard of the inhabitants' own values and sense of aesthetics. LLV was not only a criticism in design, but also a critique of the unjustifiable impact of modernist architects and planners on the everyday users and inhabitants of their projects.

A more empathic and open-minded approach to urban society had first been discussed in sociology. William F. Whyte's landmark study *Street Corner Society*, published in 1943, helped inspire a shift in perspective.³ In analysing the social organisation of an Italian 'slum' in Boston, Whyte argued that the urban underclass relied on its participation in dense social networks, albeit visibly different from those of middle-class Anglo-American society. In doing so, Whyte rebuked the idea that the urban underclass was disorganised and on the verge of social

decay - exactly the arguments that had legitimised interventions designed by modernist planners and architects.⁴

While Whyte's line of argumentation did not reach the planning professions throughout the 1950s, by 1960 a number of sociologists who were aware of the potential lessons to be learned from *Street Corner Society* had entered the academic community concerned with architecture and urban planning. Herbert Gans was one of them.⁵ *Urban Villagers*, Gans' 1962 book on another Italian-American urban community in Boston, drew on Whyte's idea and transferred it to the context of urban planning.⁶ Gans described planners' attitudes as being biased against the habits of the urban underclass whom they planned for: 'the professionals' evaluation of the behavior of slum residents is based on class-based standards that often confuse behaviour which is only culturally different with pathological or antisocial acts.'⁷ Gans was appalled by the consequences of this deep misunderstanding, and went on to claim: 'Consequently, the cultural differences between working- and middle-class residential choice suggest that the prevailing professional housing standards - which reflect only the latter - could not be rightly applied to [the *Lebenswelt* of the urban underclass, S.H.].'⁸ Gans urged urban planners and architects to reconsider their alleged middle-class perspectives on the social and built environment and rethink the modernist dogma, which had dismissed the conditions under which large parts of the urban underclass lived as 'harmful'. The values and opinions of the communities affected by planning had to be taken seriously, he argued. What could be concluded from Gans' line of argumentation was that only communities themselves could provide the necessary legitimisation for urban development.

Due to the growing importance of the social sciences in research and policy-making around 1960, the pressure to engage sociologists as experts

in the planning process rose. One of the academic institutions that had taken this trend seriously was the School of Design at the University of Pennsylvania, where Gans had become an influential figure. Other scholars at the University's School of Design followed Gans' criticism, notably Paul Davidoff, whose concept of 'advocacy planning' gained prominence in the subsequent decade.⁹ Both were very sceptical of the outcomes of modernist planning, and they were extremely critical of the legitimisation of invasive plans. It was in this intellectual environment that Scott Brown started her academic career and met Venturi in 1960. As the changing political climate of the 1960s began to affect the planning community, Scott Brown and Venturi became familiar with the debate about the adequacy of urban planning and design strategies. Their work during this decade can be interpreted as an effort to position themselves between the perceived necessity to be responsive to community needs and an emerging political radicalism.

The students at the School of Design - representing a more radical approach - started to foster fundamental doubts about the planning profession's role in society. A series of discussions with planners and architects organised by the Student Planners Association in 1962 and 1963 was led by the question: 'Who is the planner? What permits him to use the name? To whom is he responsible? What is this "expertise" of his? What proof does he have for the "rightness" of his plans?'¹⁰ One of the discussants was Philadelphia's chief planner Edmund Bacon, known for his stern approach to the planning process.¹¹ His argument was that the discussion around these questions - about the very legitimacy of the professions - could have devastating consequences. He criticised what he saw as a dangerous development in architectural theory: 'The great danger is the failure to provide concepts and images of a better life [...] of a far finer life for everyone based on a higher set of values [...]. The great danger in the planning profession today is an

abdication of leadership.'¹² Bacon then went on to blame his colleagues in academia for fostering this development. The minutes of subsequent student discussions in February 1963 taken by a student participant mention: 'Bacon claims that [their] teaching tends to undermine the self-confidence of the student.'¹³

The confrontation between many leading practitioners' still essentially 'top-down' approach, and the advocates of an alternative, more community-driven planning process, as suggested by Gans and promoted by students in the early 1960s, was in the first place political in nature. This becomes even more apparent when seen in relation to the emerging students' movement. Many of the attempts to renew society associated with the generation coming of age in the 1960s stressed the right of self-determination and shared a broad scepticism of authorities. The Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) elaborated on the concept of 'participatory democracy', students in Berkeley began a renewed struggle for free speech, while others joined the growing Civil Rights Movement. The push for a new approach to urban planning, centred on the ideal of the self-determination of communities, has to be seen in this broader context of the changing political thought during the 1960s. On the other hand Bacon's position had its own political rationale and implications, as he said: 'I think one shows far more respect for the democratic process to believe that the process itself has plenty of vigor to beat your own earnestly held values into proper shape, or reject them, than to try to second guess the process by attempting to set up a value system according to what you think somebody else wants.'¹⁴

What was being discussed in the 1960s was nothing short of the role of planners and architects in a society that linked the right to intervene in the individuals' rights with procedures that had to be justified as democratic. In effect, Gans' critique of modernist planning and design as being 'domi-

nated by middle-class values', was far-reaching as it entailed the conviction for the democratic right of self-determination: individuals from other backgrounds, more particularly the working classes he described, were not to be forced into a different way of living, values, or aesthetics. The observation that expertise in planning was unresponsive to forms of social organisation and taste other than middle-class was attributed to the fact that it was systematically removed from political discourse by stressing its 'objective' character. In essence, critics challenged the unassailable position of expertise in the planning professions, by pointing out how it conflicted with democratic principles.

Even though such questions were primarily discussed in academia, the critique of planning was not a low-profile issue in the 1960s. Popular criticism appeared in many forms throughout the decade. Jane Jacobs' *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* and Martin Anderson's *The Federal Bulldozer* being only the most influential treatises on urban renewal.¹⁵ Another such public critique on the profession was the 1964 exhibition *Architecture without Architects* at New York's Museum of Modern Art. This exhibition celebrated the ingenuity of architecture without professional involvement through images of mainly traditional, non-Western buildings and urban fabrics.¹⁶ On another level, US urban policy at this time was likewise engaged in reconsidering what architects and planners were able and allowed to do in society. When the Kennedy and Johnson administrations assumed the responsibility of improving living conditions of the urban underclass and especially those of African-Americans, they declared that the underlying problem was political in nature. In contrast to previous attempts to ameliorate 'slum life', the 'Great Society' legislation coming forth in 1964 no longer emphasised the role of the built environment. It aimed instead at strengthening the political impact of community-based development.¹⁷ Debates about both the production and management of the built environ-

ment reached a broad public and slowly redefined the role of professionals working in those fields.

What this sociological reconsideration of architecture and urban planning - focused on questions of power and the built environment - did not reflect on very much, was the question of aesthetics. It was of only minor interest that the urban underclass had their own taste, one that was very different from what professionals proposed as 'good' design. Scott Brown later on suggested that such ideas about aesthetics did in fact exist, but that they were separated from the discourse on power in the planning process. To make this point she mentioned her profound impression with the British 'New Brutalists', a group of architects inspired by working-class aesthetics she had met while studying in London: 'The New Brutalism suggested to me that social objectives might be achieved with beauty, if we could only learn to broaden our definition of beauty.'¹⁸ While the two ideas, that of planning as a political action, and that of a broadening of architectural aesthetics, emerged relatively separately during the 1950s and early 1960s, they increasingly merged by the end of the decade.

Not being political activists - at least not for the time being - Venturi and Scott Brown advanced their ideas first of all in terms of architectural criticism. In *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, published in 1966, Venturi used the concept of self-determination as it was advocated by planning scholars but applied it to architectural form. He praised the 'richness and ambiguity of the modern experience' and asserted that '[e]verywhere, except in architecture, complexity and contradiction have been acknowledged'.¹⁹ To discover such qualities in architecture it was necessary to look at the ordinary, the vernacular. The fact that the aesthetics of modernism was understood to have disrupted the tradition of endowing buildings with a rich assemblage of ornaments, and thus with symbols and signs that would have enriched the 'codification' of

the built environment, meant that the rediscovering of the rich symbolism of the vernacular became all the more important.

Venturi and Scott Brown's attempt to synchronise aesthetic ideas with the political thought of their peers - as *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* or *LLV* could be interpreted - was only the first step in developing an aesthetics that was coherent with the idea of self-determination in the planning process. This is not to say that complying with a certain political thought was the sole purpose of Venturi and Scott Brown's turn to vernacular architecture. In fact, it is hard to estimate to what extent they shared the political beliefs of many radical activists. What is certain is that by the late 1960s they consistently referred to the right of self-determination to justify their architectural aesthetics as being especially sensitive to what the average user of buildings *actually* wanted and liked.

Venturi and Scott Brown ended up identifying symbolism as a crucial aspect of the built environment, because of its potential to accommodate user needs previously neglected by modernists. In order to make sense of a building and hence to be able to actually use it, people relied on the imagery of the built environment.²⁰ In shifting the emphasis to symbolism, Venturi and Scott Brown also departed from stressing the role of the urban underclass, setting them apart from many political radicals of the late 1960s and early 1970s. While Gans and others on the border between sociology and planning had specifically talked about the world of the 'working class' and alleged 'slums', Venturi and Scott Brown broadened this notion to include the vernacular in general - explicitly including middle-class practices and customs. Las Vegas was not a place of the US-American underclass, and neither was Levittown, Pennsylvania, which they explored in a very similar way during the early 1970s.²¹

In fact, Venturi and Scott Brown showed that the

'ugly' and complex vernacular architecture adhered just as much to middle-class values. Accepting the ubiquity of American consumer culture, *LLV* demonstrated that the commercial architecture of the 'Strip' was appealing to middle-class customers.²² Despite their reference to middle-class values, their discourse still echoed its distinctive origins in the social and political activism for the advancement of the marginalised, discriminated and powerless of urban society by granting them the right of self-determination.²³

The 'Crosstown Community': vernacular design as political legitimization

Plans to replace seemingly run-down, minority neighbourhoods with inner-city expressways are not unfamiliar in postwar urban history.²⁴ The plans for a Crosstown Expressway on the southern edge of Philadelphia's Center City are hardly exceptional. The point here is to re-examine the way the planners' demand for this inner-city highway led to the complex political and professional involvement of Venturi and Scott Brown.

The idea of a thoroughfare had been on the Philadelphia City Planning Commission's (PCPC) drawing boards since the 1940s. In 1957 the project was promoted to Interstate status - meaning that the Federal government would sponsor it - and the name 'Crosstown Expressway' was beginning to be used officially.²⁵ This also implied a new quality of highway to be built. The PCPC stated its aims as follows: 'The [...] only satisfactory program is to build a primary system of express highways [...]. The mistake of "improving" purely residential streets for through traffic, including heavy trucks, can be avoided.'²⁶ As such, the expressway was to be part of a system of loops and radial connections with the suburbs. This highly abstract scheme was popular in planning theory at that time, based on ideas of the likes of Alker Tripp and Patrick Abercrombie or Robert Moses.²⁷ It was embedded in a discourse on the interrelationship between suburbanisation,

decentralisation and infrastructure, the assumption being that the inner cities would only be able to face the challenge of decentralisation if traffic was enabled to move swiftly into, from and around the city. The proposed solutions were extremely schematic, meaning that the basic idea of loops and radial expressways was indifferently imposed on cities.²⁸ One of the main proponents of such a system was the Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce, representing to a large extent inner city business interests. The neighbourhoods where the expressways were to be constructed were of no specific interest, except that acquisition costs had to be low and that projects, as critics claimed, were placed so as to eradicate social problems. In any event, the opinion of people living or making business in the area affected did not matter much from this perspective.

As the plans for the Crosstown Expressway became public, a group of concerned citizens assisted by liberal-minded organisations joined forces in 1967 to form the Citizens' Committee to Preserve and Develop the Crosstown Community (CCPDCC). The group protested the City's and Highway Department's plans, but also fostered the idea of developing an alternative vision for the area.²⁹ The need for a vision for the 'Corridor', as it came to be called, was indeed paramount. South Street, the street identified for demolition in the official plans, was easily denounced as dysfunctional, run-down, and therefore not worth preserving. Its commercial use was dominated by low-budget stores serving local and low-income customers from throughout the city and the region. Its appearance corresponded to this function. Ever since the proposed expressway was announced, abandonment and decay due to disinterest in maintaining property and public space in the 'Corridor' had further worsened the conditions in the area.³⁰

The CCPDCC had already been discussing a number of alternative proposals for the future of

South Street, when in June 1968 Venturi and Scott Brown were introduced to the group. The connection stemmed primarily from Venturi's father, who owned a store on South Street, but also from the growing interest of the artistic community in the area where at this point cheap shops were to be had.³¹ At first, the CCPDCC core members seemed to have been somewhat sceptical of the offer, but finally agreed to co-operate with the architects. Scott Brown took primary responsibility of the project.³² The intention of the collaboration was to develop an alternative plan for the 'Corridor' to fend off the City's intrusive proposals effectively. Even as City officials accepted the demand for low-rent commercial space and community facilities in the area, they met those concerns by proposing a megastructure to be built on top of the expressway. Intended to pacify the citizens' initiative on the basis of being responsive to social issues, this proposal did not, however, address the core of the criticism which aligned the right of self-determination with a minimal intervention in the built environment.³³

The citizens' initiative seems to have been familiar with Venturi and Scott Brown's opinions about the role of planners and architects and the right of self-determination. Yet it remains unknown how much the activists fighting the Crosstown Expressway exactly knew about Venturi and Scott Brown's architectural theories to be published in *LLV*. It was probably more of an underlying feeling that the architects were essentially on the same wavelength.³⁴ The parallels between the South Street and the Las Vegas projects are striking. Both streets were primarily commercial in their use and appearance, and both were in a sense aesthetically unregulated fields of vernacular architecture. Pictures taken by the architects on South Street in 1968 resemble photographs that were later published in *LLV*, showing how close the two projects were in the eyes of Venturi and Scott Brown.³⁵ It was not only the aesthetics, but also Venturi and Scott Brown's approach that indicates: 'South Street probably

relates to Las Vegas in its acceptance of reality [...]. It relates to the attempt to look non-judgementally, being sympathetic to the values and tastes of the South Street community.¹³⁶

Aspirations were high on both sides. Venturi wrote to Alice Lipscomb, one of the leading figures of the citizens' initiative: 'We too have high hopes for our association with you [the CCPDCC, S.H.]. This promises to be one of our most interesting and challenging projects we have ever worked on.'¹³⁷ In part it was the fascination of working together with the community that attracted Scott Brown and Venturi. The architects' work went beyond interpreting the prevalent features of the built environment as a source of design. Instead they were actually talking and interacting with the community, the 'architects' of the vernacular. Venturi and Scott Brown saw their involvement as a means to help out the community and the citizens' initiative. The architects shared with the concerned citizens the opinion that the plans for the Crosstown Expressway were racially and socially biased and therefore essentially unjust. The argument was that the expressway was intended to separate the poor African-American neighbourhoods to the south from the Central Business District and the upper-class neighbourhoods of Society Hill or Rittenhouse Square to the north. To make things worse, the proposed expressway was to run through an area where Philadelphia's black population was traditionally concentrated.¹³⁸ To white liberals, projects such as the Crosstown Expressway were anathema, and against the background of growing racial tensions in the late 1960s they seemed utterly reckless. Especially Scott Brown seems to have been genuinely motivated by the political implications of the project.¹³⁹ In retrospect, Venturi and Scott Brown still legitimise their involvement by citing the ultimate success of the opposition against the expressway. On their website they conclude: 'The plan proposed placed control of local planning in community hands [...]. This plan was successful and the expressway was defeated

and South Street is a vital neighbourhood today.'¹⁴⁰ The statement implies that their commitment made a political difference.

What then was the actual role of Venturi and Scott Brown in the conflict over the Crosstown Expressway that was eventually defeated? From the beginning, the citizens' initiative had an uneasy feeling about the co-operation. On the one hand they relied on Venturi and Scott Brown's expertise, and on the other hand they felt that the architects had to be kept under close control. After all, it must have seemed clear that Venturi and Scott Brown had an agenda of their own, which was aligned with the communities' goals but certainly not identical to them. While the CCPDCC mandated them to engage in very detailed negotiations with the Philadelphia City Planning Commission, who seemed to be the appropriate addressee for proposals to redevelop the 'Corridor', the citizens retained in a letter to the architects that: 'In this work you will co-operate with the staff of the Planning Commission to the extent consistent with community objectives, but you will at all times represent the objectives of the Citizens Committee.'¹⁴¹ Even though the mission statement issued by the CCPDCC reveals the intention to control the architects tightly, there was no doubt that the citizens' initiative needed their expertise - and also their reputation.

In August 1968, Scott Brown presented a first proposal to redevelop the South Street Corridor to the members of the CCPDCC. In keeping with her aim to plan for a vernacular environment she posed: 'A local store owner may accept a yearly income well below that considered feasible by the market analysts and yet be comparatively well off on South Street.'¹⁴² In doing so, she highlighted the connection between economic necessities and design. Taking into account the specific purpose of the commercial 'Strip' along South Street as a low-budget shopping area led to the conclusion that any kind of aesthetic refinement was neither desired nor needed. LLV

echoes this link between highly specific commercial purposes and the choice of design: 'words and symbols may be used in space for commercial persuasion.'⁴³

The central proposition that Scott Brown made also reflected an issue addressed in Venturi and Scott Brown's analysis of the Las Vegas Strip the relationship between speed, space and size. Movement in cars required different symbols and hence aesthetics than did signage for pedestrians. South Street's exuberant commercial signage was a good example of complex and not conventionally pleasing yet functioning symbolism that Scott Brown argued was worth preserving. In analogy to Las Vegas, Scott Brown proposed a pedestrian version of the 'Strip'. She suggested a continuous ribbon of commercial development along South Street, concentrated around a number of 'nodes', which were to include clusters of public facilities. By concentrating efforts at these 'nodes' the proposal hoped to enhance its impact on future progress.⁴⁴ Most importantly, the alternative plan devised by Scott Brown on behalf of the CCPDCC was actually based on very minimal physical intervention - certainly when compared to the highway proposal and other alternative schemes such as the megastructure proposal. It built on the existing structures and aesthetics of South Street and made them into the core of the future development. The intended effect was to reduce outside intervention in the 'Crosstown Community' by gauging it against existing commercial use. To prove that such a development was possible - in the community there was some doubt that there were enough businesses left to support such a continuous commercial 'Strip' - Scott Brown launched a survey of the commercial enterprises along South Street. The surveyors found that: 'Of the 798 addresses along South Street 30% are vacant stores or empty shells and 13% are residences, but, 53% are occupied by functioning commercial enterprises. Despite its outward appearance, South Street is a street of considerable commercial activity.'⁴⁵ While the

figures themselves appear to be low, this optimistic rhetoric reveals the potential Scott Brown and her collaborators attributed to South Street as it existed both in terms of its aesthetic appearance and the community's commitment.

The vision Scott Brown developed on the basis of these observations, which were closely related to those she and Venturi made in Las Vegas, went beyond retaining the character of the low-budget commercial district. The architects thought it was promising to exploit the characteristics of South Street and capitalise on its peculiarities. Again they struck a connection between the political goal of advancing the local residents' situation and the vernacular aesthetic. Scott Brown's proposal to the CCPDCC stated: 'Revitalization of the commercial activities along South Street to enable local store owners to attract a much wider market. Encouraging and assisting local residents to become store owners on a revived South Street. An accompanying physical renovation of existing storefronts emphasizing their unique architectural quality.'⁴⁶ Focusing on the 'main street' appearance and originality of South Street was also intended as a means of marketing that district and attracting outside businesses. But local residents did not seem to mind. On the contrary, Venturi and Scott Brown's visions were applauded by some in the local community as bringing up-scale development to the area. *The Queen Village Crier*, a neighbourhood organisation newsletter, concurred: 'One of the most exciting ideas in the South Street renewal plans concerns the Queen Village end of South Street. A San Francisco-style Fisherman's Wharf, with restaurants and small shops overlooking the Delaware River...'⁴⁷ To some extent economic success served as a benchmark for the viability of vernacular aesthetics, something that was not entirely compatible with the notion of self-determination.

Over the next few years the area underwent dramatic change. The 'South Street Renaissance'

had a decisive impact among the factors eventually halting the plans for the Crosstown Expressway in 1973. The turn-around in the 'Corridor' showed that Scott Brown's concept had reverberated. And it was indeed the vernacular aesthetics Venturi and Scott Brown had popularised that fuelled the influx of new stores and commercial activity. But, it appealed not so much to long-established resident entrepreneurs and customers as it did to the young alternative scene. The list of stores concentrating on arts and crafts, second-hand clothing and ecologically produced food that had opened on South Street between 1968 and 1972 reads like a caricature of 'hippie-capitalism': 'Dhanalakshmi: [...] Come here for some Cosmic Ice Cream [...] The Works Craft Gallery: [...] Exhibition of Batiks [...] Eyes Gallery: [...] Pre-Columbian & Pre-Incaic Ceramics, weavings & jewelry [...] Coyote: [...] Recycled clothes of every kind...'⁴⁸ These new entrepreneurs might have realised that their presence ran counter to the original residents' right of self-determination, but they also emphasised their positive influence on South Street: 'Though created by the new people, it is, in a very real sense, a renaissance for the many traditional merchants and residents too - people who have seen their homes and hopes stifled by 25 years of intensive bureaucracy.'⁴⁹

This new development on South Street pointed to a dilemma inherent in propagating vernacular aesthetics. By the early 1970s it appealed to a growing proportion especially of young Americans. It did so primarily because it came to represent authenticity, and, in a way, the right of self-determination. The right to retain 'ugliness' became a political statement of the period shared with the views of a new generation of architects and urban planners. Venturi and Scott Brown played an important role in promoting and explaining the interconnection between the vernacular aesthetic and the right of self-determination.⁵⁰

Conclusions: architectural theory and political history

Venturi and Scott Brown's engagement in the controversy over Philadelphia's proposed Crosstown Expressway highlights the duality of the architect's role as an actor in society. On the one hand they needed to position themselves within the community of professionals concerned with urban planning and architecture: sociologists who advanced the notion of a right of self-determination, such as Gans, and older, established planners like Edmund Bacon, who were not convinced of self-determination as the most promising foundation of urban planning. On the other hand they needed to interact with local inhabitants: with community organisers involved in the citizens' initiative against the Crosstown Expressway, but also with the Chamber of Commerce that relentlessly promoted the Crosstown Expressway. Consequently, the architectural discourse in which Venturi and Scott Brown were engaged related to political history on two levels. The intellectual environment in which their ideas developed throughout the 1960s was highly politicised in its theoretical premises, but also their everyday practice related to situations that were politically charged.

Venturi and Scott Brown were convinced that self-determination in urban contexts was a valuable source of sound architectural design and a legitimate political goal. Ultimately, their opinion about the planning process had its roots in beliefs about how society worked, a particular outlook on the rising rights-consciousness in American society, and opinions about how conflicting rights were to be weighted, fostered by their intellectual environment in academia. Through their engagement in the 'Crosstown Controversy' they wanted to show that the assumptions they extracted from their observations of the Las Vegas Strip served as a viable approach to architectural design and so demonstrate that the instructions they formulated from the passive perspective of an observer could actually be used actively in urban design.⁵¹ It can further be

understood as an attempt to show that vernacular aesthetics were an equivalent of the notion of self-determination in the planning process.

This intention superimposed the actual interest in the fate of the inhabitants and their right to self-determination. This is not to narrow the architects' honest concern for the 'Crosstown Community'. And yet this concern was to some extent instrumental to their argument for vernacular architecture. With their involvement in the 'Crosstown Controversy', Venturi and Scott Brown - perhaps predominantly - addressed the academic community. To make their point elaborated in *LLV*, in an intellectual environment that saw the community's right of self-determination as a means of social advancement, it was essential to Venturi and Scott Brown's argumentation to invoke the struggle against the expressway as an example of that right.

In the confrontation over the Crosstown Expressway, Venturi and Scott Brown found themselves in a constellation of very different groups of actors. The group the architects felt most sympathetic towards was, of course, the CCPDCC. They shared with them the conviction that the proposed expressway was an outrage and a political matter. But, the citizens' initiative did not really want Scott Brown and her co-workers to come up with plans of their own. Instead, they postulated that the architects were willing to adjust their proposals to the political will of the organised local citizenry. This was not entirely the case. Venturi and Scott Brown accepted the political goals of the CCPDCC as legitimate and desirable but pursued their own agenda of proving the viability of vernacular architecture. In a sense the citizens group and the architects were in a win-win situation. And indeed, the CCPDCC was successful in pursuing this strategy. The citizens' initiative was able to enhance the legitimacy of its proposal for the revitalisation of the 'Corridor' by referring to the involvement of such prominent architects as the firm of Venturi and Scott Brown.

The combined influence of the CCPDCC, Scott Brown, and a number of other actors who rose against the expressway proposal was high, but its success was also assured by the simultaneous dithering of the city administration. As early as 1968, Mayor James Tate declared the Crosstown Expressway was 'either dead or dying a slow death'.⁵² But this was not the last word on the issue and the Chamber of Commerce and the State Highway Department kept the idea alive - with some temporary success - until 1973. The Philadelphia City Planning Commission, in charge of designing whatever solution was politically feasible, subsequently moved ahead on very diverse and even contradicting plans: they made surveys for a depressed highway, on solutions for a 'cover' on top of the expressway, and planned for a revived South Street at different stages throughout this period.⁵³ In the context of such insecurity, the stern and convincing position of the CCPDCC in collaboration with Venturi and Scott Brown was crucial. For the Planning Commission the architects, and not so much the citizens' initiative, were an appropriate partner; as professionals, they had to be taken seriously.⁵⁴ For the concrete negotiations it seems to have been crucial that Venturi and Scott Brown confronted the staff of the Planning Commission with their visions that were coherent with the political values they built their reputation on. Responsiveness in the local power structure - be it through sympathetic citizens' initiatives or indecisive authorities - was a crucial precondition for the implementation of any idea derived from a specific standpoint of architectural theory.

The world view that Venturi and Scott Brown brought to this project was not necessarily very similar to that of other key actors - not even those of the citizens' initiative that mandated the architects. Reference to the 'community' was a widely accepted form of operationalising the concept of self-determination: the right of self-determination was attributed to the 'community' and came to be considered the

prime source of legitimisation for urban planning.

The problem the opponents of the Crosstown Expressway had to face - and community-based planning in general - was that this 'community' remained in most cases an imagined entity. With Venturi and Scott Brown, a certain image of the vernacular intertwined with a certain image of the 'community'.⁵⁵ Problems became apparent when the CCPDCC set out to organise the affected neighbourhoods more formally. Most of them already had neighbourhood associations, while some additional ones sprung up during the conflict. They all claimed to represent the people of a certain area, while in fact most of them were based on ethnic groups - mostly African-, Polish- and Italian-American. Due to this fuzzy definition inherent in the concept of 'community' the areas they claimed to be responsible for not only overlapped, but there was a good deal of distrust and diverging interests among the neighbourhood organisations.⁵⁶

Taking the right of self-determination seriously was easy when there was an expressway to be opposed, but it became a difficult tool for generating a positive vision, when it tended to be shaped by racist attitudes that impeded collaboration. Invoking the right of self-determination and appealing to the 'community' did not necessarily lead to the results intellectuals had thought it would. The discourse in academia that had preceded the many experiments in urban planning and architecture around 1970 centred on the idea that the 'community' was the source of alternative and inherently progressive solutions to urban problems. Many of those professionals developing their ideas in the 1960s believed that a new and more humane urban form could be derived from granting disadvantaged citizens a larger influence on the planning process. In reality, as the example of Venturi and Scott Brown's involvement in the revitalisation of the South Street 'Corridor' shows, making the right of self-determination the basis for urban planning and architectural

design was more complex than assumed: in many cases it became an extremely defensive tool often combined with conservative notions. So, collaboration with the 'community' could be a disappointing experience - leading again to a more disinterested and less overtly politicised current in architectural thought.⁵⁷ Perhaps this was one reason why Venturi and Scott Brown refrained from explicit political statements in *LLV* and did not refer to their South Street experience in any way.

Relating Venturi and Scott Brown's statements on architectural design to their engagement in the 'Crosstown Controversy' highlights a specific role architects play as actors in society. They were not merely 'translators' between parties or between the desires of the local citizenry and the official planning process but clearly followed an agenda of their own. The architects acted as political stakeholders, whose expertise carried weight, not merely as specialists for design commissioned by politicians, investors or, for that matter, citizens' initiatives, but in positioning themselves in relation to other actors the way they thought would best fit their own goals and convictions - with mixed results.

Notes

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3. William F. Whyte, *Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1943).
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5. Denise Scott Brown, 'Learning From Brutalism', in *The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the aesthetics*

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6. Herbert J. Gans, *The Urban Villagers: Group and Class in the Life of Italian-Americans* (New York: Free Press, 1962).
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 8. Ibid., p. 316.
 9. Paul Davidoff, 'Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning', *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 31 (1965), pp. 103-15.
 10. Letter from the University of Pennsylvania Student Planners Association to Paul Davidoff (October 3rd, 1962), Architectural Archives of the University of Pennsylvania (ArchA), 095, 228.
 11. Letter from the University of Pennsylvania Student Planners Association to Edmund Bacon (May 21st, 1962), ArchA, 095, 213.
 12. Edmund Bacon, *Current Problems of the Planning Profession: A Talk Presented to the Annual Conference of the American Institute of Planners* (October 27th, 1963), ArchA, 095, 256.
 13. University of Pennsylvania Student Planners Association, Notes on a discussion with Paul Davidoff and Edmund Bacon (February 1963), ArchA, 095, 228, p. 4.
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 18. Scott Brown, 'Learning From Brutalism', p. 204f.
 19. Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1966), p. 22.
 20. Cf. Venturi, Scott Brown, Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, p. 104f.
 21. Cf. Jessica Lutin, 'Learning from Levittown. Venturi and Scott Brown's Approach to Architecture in Teaching and Suburbia', Paper presented at The Society for American City and Regional Planning History 12th National Conference (October 25-28, 2007).
 22. Cf. Hall, *Cities of Tomorrow*, p. 323.
 23. Cf. Sarah Chaplin, 'Heterotopia Deserta: Las Vegas and Other Spaces', in *Intersections: Architectural Histories and Critical Theories*, ed. by Ian Borden and Jane Rendell (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 203-20 (p. 211f).
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42. Denise Scott Brown, *First Report to the Citizens' Committee to Preserve and Develop the Crosstown Community* (August 6th, 1968), ArchA, 225.II.A, 24.27, p. 13.
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Biography

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